

PRONGHORNS

Story and Photos by Curt Wells

The instant we crested the hill and spotted the pronghorn buck bedded in an alfalfa field, I knew he was “The One.”

Not because he had exceptional horn length – quite the contrary, he was average.

This buck was The One because of a mistake. He’d bedded in a field strewn with large round hay bales and there was a rise to the terrain behind him that would allow us to approach him undetected. The wind was blowing in his face and there were no other pronghorns in the area to distract him. The buck’s position was bordered on two sides by well-traveled roads, one gravel, one paved. And most important of all, I had permission to hunt the field.

Loaded down with a pop-up ground blind, 3-D pronghorn decoy and our bows, hunting buddy Kendall Bauer and I hustled down the fenceline, behind and just over the hill from the unsuspecting buck. We quietly set up the blind next to a hay bale, positioned the decoy 20 yards out, settled into folding chairs, cracked open a bottle of water and waited. For two hours.

Our patience was fueled by the knowledge we hadn’t spooked the buck out of his mid-day bed. We predicted that when the buck got up he wasn’t likely to cross either road, and a fence to the west would serve as a minor barrier. Surely, he’d come south, over the hill.

Black horns pierced the horizon first as the rested buck wandered over the hill. He immediately saw the decoy. When Kendall pulled a string attached to the fake, rotating the decoy slightly, the buck bought the scam and walked right in. I pulled my bowstring and the arrow hit right where it was supposed to.

For once I was right. He was The One.

Bowhunting pronghorns is a continuing quest for the right animal. For some, that could be a fat doe. Heck, any pronghorn taken with a bow is a trophy. For experienced pronghorn bowhunters, the right animal may

be a buck with thick 13-inch horns. Or if you’re like me, you’re happy with any decent buck.

Finding the right pronghorn, however, is never really accomplished until the animal you want is in the right place at the right time in the right situation. Well, right for you, wrong for the pronghorn.

What makes a pronghorn the right one largely depends on one of the four basic techniques of hunting. Learning to “read” an animal and recognize situations conducive to your style of hunting comes from experience.

Of course, reading pronghorns is a lot easier if there are plenty of animals around to study. That is the case in North Dakota at the moment. The current statewide population estimate is 12,500 animals, down 18 percent from 2005, but considerably higher than the 1998 estimate of 4,000 animals following the brutal winter of 1996-97.

More pronghorns means more opportunities for both archery and gun hunters, but even then trying to take a pronghorn with a bow is not easy. Perhaps that’s why so few people try it – fewer than 1,500 in 2005, compared to more than 15,000 deer bowhunters. Bowhunting for pronghorns is a test of skills, and good bowhunters are a patient lot.



This young pronghorn is completely fooled as it casually walks past a 3-D decoy.

Up Close

The most difficult moment when using a two-dimensional decoy is taking the shot. You just have to make your move and hope the animal hesitates at some point and you get a good shot angle at a decent range.

Bowhunting North Dakota Pronghorns – The Numbers

North Dakota is one of only a handful of states with unlimited pronghorn archery licenses for both residents and nonresidents. The state typically ranks in the top four in number of pronghorn bowhunting licenses issued, yet has far fewer antelope than other Western states. For example, in 2002 North Dakota sold 1,002 archery licenses, while Montana, a state with about 10 times more pronghorns, had only 1,520 archery pronghorn hunters. Wyoming has 45 times more antelope, yet only had 909 bowhunters in 2002. Those two states, as well as most Western states, limit licenses for nonresidents and conduct license lotteries.

Bowhunters pursuing pronghorns in North Dakota have steadily increased in number for the past two decades with the exception of a two-year downturn after the infamous winter of 1997. Only 510 licenses were sold in 1998 and 500 in 1999. By 2003, that number was up to 1,075 and topped out at 1,390 last fall as pronghorn herds have responded to a string of mild winters.



Let's look at those four basic methods for getting yourself up close with a pronghorn.

Waterholes and Fences

The traditional hunting strategy is to set up a blind near a waterhole and wait for pronghorns to come to drink. This works great in states where water sources are few and far between. It can work well in North Dakota in dry years, but if you depend on it as your sole hunting strategy – and it rains – you'll spend a lot of time alone.

It's usually a good idea to build a waterhole blind well before the season so animals grow accustomed to it. Don't place it too close to the water or you'll make the pronghorns more nervous than they already are. Make sure the inside of the blind is dark, with no light penetrating, and wear dark or black clothing to conceal movement.

Another version of this technique is to set up near well-used fence crossings or open gates. We used to hunt near an open gate where the rancher would set a couple of hay bales and animals would parade through the gate throughout the day. Preseason scouting is crucial for this type of hunting.

Spot-and-Stalk

Sneaking to within 30 yards of an animal with huge eyes that can spot the round knob on the top of your cap from a half-mile away isn't easy. Somewhere in the process you have to catch a break, either by finding a pronghorn bedded in a washout with the wind in its face, or locating one walking along a fence with some cover you can use.

This is the most difficult way to kill a pronghorn with a bow and you'll likely experience many failed stalks before even releasing an arrow.

Good optics will introduce you to distant pronghorns, and you'll need to be in shape to hustle across the sun-baked prairie to cut off a fast-walking buck. Your mission will also demand that you belly-crawl while dodging cactus and rattlesnakes, all the while choking on dust kicked up by the incessant wind.

And that's the easy part. If you do get close enough for a shot you'll have to estimate the yardage within three or four yards, get an arrow in your bow, raise up into shooting position, come to full draw, aim and release an arrow without spooking the animal so bad he doesn't become a permanent resident of the next county. That's the hard part. But it can be done with patience and lots of opportunities.

Blind Decoying

Using a decoy is my favorite method for hunting pronghorns, or any game for that matter. I just love fooling game, whether it's with fake brethren or a call.

For most of my pronghorn hunting I search for a place with lots of pronghorn traffic, or for a specific situation like the bedded buck. It requires some work to haul all your gear, but you can ease the load with a deer cart or a modified golf club pull cart for your blind and decoy.

There aren't a lot of options when it comes to three-dimensional decoys so I typically use a 3-D target that's been modified. I first install glass eyes, which you can get from a taxidermist, just to add some realism. I like decoys with some life, so we put ours on a pedestal and run two strings to the blind. When a pronghorn shows up, we can spin the decoy by pulling the strings. That'll often bring an otherwise suspicious buck running in a cloud of dust.

A hayfield with large round bales is my favorite place to hunt because my blind blends in so well. Fortunately, pronghorns aren't nearly as blind-wary as white-tailed deer. You can even get away with placing a blind in a vacant field, especially when using a decoy.

Pursuit Decoying

Instead of sitting around, baking in a blind all day, you can choose the more difficult of the two decoying techniques, pursuit decoying. I need to spend more time doing this because it's by far the most exciting way to take a pronghorn with a bow.

It works best with two hunters, one to work the two-dimensional decoy and the other to work his bow. You must first locate a buck you think will respond to another buck. That usually means a herd buck that has a harem of does. You hope for a hill or gully to use as cover until you're close enough to challenge the buck. It's difficult to say how close that is, but I've seen bucks run a half-mile from their herds to chase off interlopers.

Once you're in position, the decoyer kneels behind the decoy and tips it up so the herd buck can see it. The shooter often kneels right behind the decoyer or off to one side taking advantage of any available cover.

If the plan works, the herd buck sees the decoy and charges in to run off the young challenger. The decoyer can use a rangefinder on the incoming buck through a hole in

Right: This 3-D decoy is mounted on a pedestal with strings coming from the blind that can be pulled to rotate it. Below: The view from inside a pop-up ground blind set in the middle of a hayfield full of bales.



the decoy, keeping the shooter apprised of the quickly changing distance.

The responding buck will be riveted on the decoy, and there have been cases of bucks actually ramming the decoy, sending the decoyer sprawling. Hopefully, the shooter can come to full draw and get a shot off before that happens.

Here again, rising up, drawing and shooting is the tough part. It's common for a buck to bolt at the appearance of the shooter, but they'll often just run a few yards and stop to quizzically look back at the situation. That's when you have to be ready and get a well-placed arrow in the air.

This method can also be done by a lone hunter handling decoy and bow, but your decoy will have to stand on its own, by pushing a steel rod into the dirt so you can shoot.

No matter how you attempt pursuit decoying, it will be one of the most difficult challenges in bowhunting because everything has to come together perfectly. I've yet to get a pronghorn with this technique, but have

tried it and will keep trying until I make it work.

The first two methods of hunting can be done throughout the pronghorn season, but decoying works best during the rut. Decoying works in early September, but by mid-month the bucks are getting increasingly love-sick and are more likely to respond. The rut also keeps bucks moving, which increases your chances of locating them and finding the right buck.

Despite its difficulties, bowhunting pronghorns is worth the effort because you know you'll see game every day and enjoy some kind of action. You'll have to battle the wide open spaces, wind, heat, cactus and the most incredible eyesight of any animal you'll ever hunt.

Even so, we're fortunate in North Dakota to have the opportunity to take on these challenges – up close.

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Pronghorn Gear

Bowhunting pronghorns requires the use of some specialized gear. Here are a few things to consider.

- Optics are crucial. A spotting scope helps you locate animals and binoculars help you keep track of them during a stalk. Cheap glass will let you down in poor light or when looking toward the sun, so go with as much quality as you can afford. Unless you've practiced judging yardage from ground level, in tall grass, you're probably not as good at estimating yardage as you think. A laser rangefinder is a necessity for the bowhunter using sights.

- You can kill a pronghorn with a traditional bow, but it's exponentially more difficult because of slower arrow speeds. Even with a compound, a 30-yard shot at an alert pronghorn may hit nothing but air because the animal will be gone when the arrow gets there. Light arrows from 250 to 350 grains, tipped with an ultra-sharp, 100-grain, low-profile broadhead (fixed blade or mechanical) should slip the wind and do the trick. If that combo is traveling at 260 to 300 feet per second, you'll up your odds of success.

- Wear light-colored, high-contrast camouflage for stalking the prairie, and dark, or even black clothing, for inside a ground blind. Stuff a hydration bladder in your pack so you always have water, and because the human face shines like the moon, paint it.

- Knee pads can save you wear and tear. The foam style pads volleyball players wear will work, but serious pronghorn stalkers will use leather knee pads to protect against cactus while crawling. Make sure you practice wearing them because the straps across the back of your knees can be troublesome. (Also a practical item for gun hunters.)

- Decoys work very well with pronghorns. Use a two-dimensional decoy for pursuit decoying, but make sure it has a hole through which to aim your rangefinder. Three-dimensional decoys are hard to come by. We've made our own or used 3-D targets we hollowed out to save weight. Installing glass eyes seems to help and we've used real horns, but not so big as to intimidate incoming bucks.

The author with the buck described at the beginning of the article.



Caring for Your Pronghorn

Once you get a good whiff of a pronghorn, you'll never forget the aroma. But don't associate that odor with the idea of a pronghorn supper. Personally, I prefer North Dakota's alfalfa-fed pronghorns to any other wild game, with the exception of a fat, spike elk.

The trick, as with all wild game, is field care. It's often hot during the bow season, so time is short. The following recommendations also apply during the pronghorn gun season.

Recover your animal quickly and don't haul it around in a pickup in the sun all day and expect it to taste good. Get it out of the sun and get the hide off to allow body heat to escape. Never wash your unskinned antelope with water as that makes the skin lay down, capturing body heat like a plastic bag. A standard size cooler will easily hold the meat of a boned out pronghorn and a block of ice will help get it cool and keep it that way.

If you plan to mount the head, know that the skin is very thin and the hair is extremely thick and will slip, ruining the cape, if it isn't taken care of in a matter of hours. Leave plenty of back skin for your taxidermist, and then get the head and cape into a separate cooler or to your taxidermist as soon as possible. Again, don't wash the cape. Leave it dry, the taxidermist will get the blood off for you.